



State Administration, Public Retirement, and Veterans' Affairs Interim Committee

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56th Montana Legislature

SENATE MEMBERS

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E.P. "PETE" EKEGREN
DON HARGROVE
GLENN A. ROUSH

HOUSE MEMBERS

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TOM DELL
CAROL WILLIAMS

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SHERI HEFFELFINGER
RESEARCH ANALYST
JOHN MacMASTER, ATTORNEY
DAVID NISS, ATTORNEY
JOANN JONES, SECRETARY

MINUTES

VETERANS' AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEE

Montana Association of Counties

Helena, Montana

November 8-9, 1999

Please Note: These are summary minutes. Testimony and discussion are paraphrased and condensed. Committee tapes are on file in the offices of the Legislative Services Division. **Exhibits for this meeting are available upon request. Legislative Council policy requires a charge of 15 cents a page for copies of documents.**

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT

Sen. Don Hargrove, Chairman
Sen. Glenn A. Roush

Rep. Edith J. Clark
Rep. Carol Williams

STAFF PRESENT

David Niss, Attorney
Jo Ann Jones, Secretary

CALL TO ORDER AND ROLL CALL

Sen. Hargrove called the meeting to order at 4:30 p.m., November 8, 1999.

COMMITTEE PROCEEDINGS

[Discussion is a continuation of testimony and discussion heard by the State

Administration, Public Retirement, and Veterans' Affairs Interim Committee in regard to the Homeless StandDown and other veterans' issues.]

Sen. Hargrove said the Legislature can only pass laws, and laws have to be specific in nature. He said that resolutions can be sent to the Montana delegation to Congress, but the resolutions do not carry a lot of weight.

Sen. Roush said that it is premature to talk about appropriations of money during the next session, but he would like to receive input on what is needed in regard to funding.

Sen. Hargrove said any proposals made to the Subcommittee should be specific.

Rick Salyer, chairman, Homeless Task Force, and former commander, DAV, said that when an attempt is made to make people responsible for doing their jobs, one of their first reactions is defensiveness when job descriptions are examined. He said that he would like to see the Legislature as part of the solution by funding the facilitation of communication and making the Veterans' Affairs administration responsible for the health care served to veterans. He said that programs are available within the state, but some may need to be re-identified. Sen. Hargrove commented that the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) charter must first be examined.

Mike Hankins, co-chair of security task force for the StandDown and Korean veteran, said someone at the top must be the one who is answered to in regard to funds disbursal. Sen. Hargrove said there are accountable people at the top of the state's organizational charts now, and suggested that Mr. Hankins might be recommending an ombudsman.

Debra Daggett, commander, Disabled American Veterans (DAV), said New Jersey once set up an Agent Orange commission to collect data although Veterans' Affairs (VA)

was supposed to have done it. She said that New Jersey's action forced the VA to take action, and said that Montana is now in position to take the lead in regard to homelessness.

Sen. Hargrove asked David Niss, Subcommittee counsel, for his input. Mr. Niss said that he would review any proposed study plans developed by Sheri Heffelfinger, research analyst, and he also suggested the Subcommittee examine models from other states.

Gen. John Prendergast, adjutant general, DMA, said the time frame being discussed could be lengthy, but noted that there are veterans in need right now. He said he would volunteer his services to open up lines of communication between those in need and the agencies in order to resolve some problems now.

Sen. Hargrove said that frequently it is discovered that the laws and the authority already exists, and the problem is really one of communication.

Jim Jacobsen, administrator, Montana Veterans' Affairs Division (MVAD), said the issue of the StandDown is being mixed up with the larger issue of homelessness. He said that it should be recognized that there have been successes as well as problems.

Michael O'Neil, Golden Triangle Community Mental Health Center, said that he wanted to reiterate that communication is the key to solving the problems.

David Miller, mental health social worker, God's Love, said accountability is part of the equation, too.

Sen. Hargrove asked Mr. Niss to send a letter to the DMA to confirm the essentials issues discussed at the Subcommittee meeting. He also requested Mr. Niss to

contact the Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) for a representative to address the Subcommittee in regard to homeless assistance.

Mike Hanshew, administrator, Senior and Long-Term Care Division, DPHHS, said that he would discuss it with Laurie Ekanger, executive director, DPHHS, and Hank Hudson, administrator, Public Assistance Division, DPHHS.

Mr. Jacobsen said there is currently a bill before Congress that would fund one StandDown in every state, every year.

Sen. Roush said the Subcommittee must keep in mind that there are two issues, the StandDown and the treatment of veterans.

Gen. Prendergast asked what support can be relied on from the legislators. Sen. Hargrove assured him that the Subcommittee would stand behind any effort that he or the DMA might make.

Sen. Roush suggested the Subcommittee visit some of the sites mentioned earlier in the full committee. Rep. Clark said that she would like to spend a day working with Ann Hamerla, Lewis & Clark County Health Department nurse.

Sen. Roush commented that the VA will not authorize payment of nursing home care for non-VA nursing homes. Mr. Jacobsen said the VA will pay for non-veteran nursing home care for six months because of waiting lists to be admitted to VA nursing homes.

Mr. Niss suggested hearing information about what veterans-related services have been cut.

ADJOURNMENT

Rep. Williams moved to adjourn. The meeting adjourned at 5:30 p.m.

[The Subcommittee re-convened on November 9, 1999, in order to hear any public comment in accordance to what had been published on the agenda.]

CALL TO ORDER

Sen. Hargrove called the meeting to order at 4:10 p.m., November 9, 1999, and asked for public comment.

Gen. Prendergast said that he had already begun coalition work that morning to discuss the issues. He said that he is confident there are many agencies with resources available, but the need is to open lines of communication.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business to come before the Subcommittee, it adjourned at 4:15 p.m. on a motion by Rep. Clark.

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